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AUTHOR(S):

Jomo, Kwame Sundaram

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Book Review

Capital, Colonialism and Contradiction in the Making of the Sino-Singaporean Bourgeoisie

Jomo Kwame Sundaram*

A Review of Lee Poh Ping's

*Chinese Society in Nineteenth Century Singapore***

Dr. Lee Poh Ping's project is no simple one. That he succeeds in pulling it off as well as he does in this compact and very readable book is indeed admirable. Inspired by the structuralist historical method of Barrington Moore,[1] the author seeks to interpret the chronic instability of Singapore Chinese society in the third quarter of the last century. He analyses the structure of this community in the context of the changing interests and strategy of British imperialism in the region. From such a perspective, the four riots which occurred in this period can be seen as outcomes of the clash of interests as British free traders and their Chinese partners encroached upon the previously established Chinese plantation interests exporting gambier and pepper. This contradiction is subsequently displaced with the extension of British administration to the Malayan peninsula from 1874. The book is well organized around this theme with each chapter neatly unfolding into the next. It therefore seems best to retain this structure in summarizing his argument.

Before Raffles annexed Singapore on behalf of the British, there already existed a small but significant agriculture cum trading economy on the island. The gambier and pepper society in Singapore had its roots here and continued to grow after 1819 when the island went to the British. This agricultural economy consisted of small plantations employing no more than twenty labourers each. The latter appear to have gained the lion's share of the wealth produced by controlling the export of the commodities, by charging high interest rates for credit advances to the

* Department of Development and Planning, Faculty of Economics, The National University of Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

** 1978. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press. 139+xiii p.

1) See Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston, 1967).

planters and by often being the local shopkeeper and hence supplier of goods needed by the plantations. From top to bottom, this economy was a predominantly Teochew preserve.

The free trade impulse was mainly directed against the mercantilist trade policies of the English and Dutch East India Companies. In Singapore, free trade was promoted by the 'country traders,' i.e. those individuals allowed by the English East India Company to take some part in the trade with the East. In England, they were strongly supported by the ascending industrialist interests whom many served as agents. To make a success of free trade, trustworthy intermediaries were needed to take care of distribution in the hinterland. These 'compradors' dealt directly with or were employed by the European agents who ultimately dominated the import and export trade.[2)]

In Singapore Chinese society then, the choicest candidates for this role were those who were more westernized and who had investments and families on the island or in other territories under British rule and who were thus discouraged from abscondence. The Malacca Chinese, who were already eminently qualified according to these two criteria, possessed yet another advantage in being more familiar with the Malay language which was essential for dealing with the population of the hinterland.

Another important facet of Singapore Chinese society of those times was the existence of secret societies. Lee argues that in the harsh Singapore environment then, and confronted with a hostile or at best, indifferent colonial administration, such societies thrived. While inheriting a long and complex tradition from China, secret societies in Singapore, as elsewhere overseas, were transformed to meet the special needs of the frontier society.

According to Lee, the societies united the unsettled male population across speech-dialect and clan divisions which had not yet become very pronounced in mid-nineteenth century Singapore society. With a combination of ritual, coercion and welfare facilities, the secret societies managed to embrace much of the Sino-Singaporean population. The 'compradors,' who were predominantly Malacca Chinese, i.e. the most desinicized of the Chinese, were enjoying privileges and protection from the colonial state and were largely left out of this. They certainly did not exercise control over the secret societies. Instead, it seems that it was those not involved in comprador activities who used the organizations to their advantage. In this connection, Lee takes issue with J. C. Jackson's[3)] suggestion that the hierarchy of the secret societies coincided with that of the gambier and pepper economy. While he agrees with Jackson that the financiers

2) According to this definition then, the compradors do not include small merchant capitalists — such as retailers and shopkeepers — whose positions were not strategic and who were dependent on the compradors, and hence enjoyed less lucrative profits.

3) J. C. Jackson, *Planters and Speculators* (Kuala Lumpur, 1968).

and more successful planters probably dominated the secret societies in the early years, Lee insists that this control was unlikely to have continued after the successful financiers moved to the towns. Lee argues that the secret societies were taken over by the unsuccessful planters and their workers. Unfortunately, he does not offer any actual evidence of such control, choosing instead to deduce this interpretation from the nature of the responses of the secret societies to various crises.

With this background, the author goes on to explain the four major riots involving the Chinese community in nineteenth century Singapore. The 1854 and 1876 riots have been viewed by most observers as involving clashes between rival dialect groups of Chinese. While not dismissing the religious, regional (or dialect group) and secret society divisions in this turmoil, Lee successfully explains these social boundaries in the complex web of contradictory class interests. The incidents are then seen as consequences of the business expansion of the free traders, who were strongly supported by the colonial state, and the ensuing intrusion on extant Chinese capitalist interests. Thus, attempts by free traders to wrest control of the lucrative Siamese rice import trade and China remittance service from Teochew businessmen resulted in the 1854 and 1870 riots respectively. Over both these issues, the Malacca Chinese and their Hokkien retailer partners — who both stood to gain from British success — came down on the side of the free traders.

The 1857 general strike organized by secret societies has been described as the result of misunderstanding by hawkers and vendors of the good intentions of the colonial administration. With the rapid growth of Singapore's population in the 1850s (due to increased immigration) and the displacement of the gambier and pepper economy, many people turned to hawking and other petty trades for survival. The resultant disorderly cluttering up of the city stood in the way of the smooth expansion of the free trade economy. Government efforts to give some order to this mess hurt such petty bourgeois activity, though this was denied by the authorities. Secret society initiative in the resistance was therefore in response to this apparent government threat. This also suggests that the Chinese population in Singapore's colonial entrepot economy was essentially petty bourgeois in character.

The author goes on to argue that British intervention in the Malayan peninsula greatly increased the profitable investment opportunities for Chinese businessmen in the Straits Settlements, thus dissipating the economic basis for the earlier contention — between the free traders plus their allies on the one hand, and the incumbent mercantilists and planters on the other — over the limited pie offered by the entrepot economy. Almost simultaneously with this intervention, the British stepped up their efforts to regulate and control the Chinese community. While an official Chinese Protectorate was established in 1877, the

primary regulatory mode was through the existing secret societies. However, when this arrangement appeared to have outlived its usefulness in the late 1880s, the colonial authorities began to deprive the societies of some of their power. The secret societies duly organized riots in protest, thus providing the government with a pretext for proscription in 1890. Thereafter, the Crown established an advisory board, consisting of prominent Chinese, to serve as an intermediary for dealing with the Chinese community at lage, while also seeking to cultivate 'friendly' Chinese organizations. These clan and dialect group associations were led primarily by merchants, manufacturers and clerks, i.e. people who were not expected to fundamentally challenge the status quo. These organizations also built upon the economic specialization which had developed along dialect group lines. The new colonial policy towards the Chinese community encouraged the development of local businessmen who were less linked to the secret societies. In some measure, this group was also indebted to the British for their enhanced political, social and economic positions.

Lee also points out that, as many non-Malacca Chinese emerged to be compradors in the growing commercial networks, the Malacca Chinese responded by moving into the professions or occupations requiring heavy financial commitments, such as banking. Thus, the overwhelming domination of Malacca Chinese under the hegemony of the free traders gave way to the challenge from immigrant entrepreneurs from China. Nevertheless, by moving into the professions and by otherwise ingratiating themselves with the authorities, the Malacca Chinese elite managed to perpetuate its admittedly eroded position of legitimate political leadership until the recent past. Hence, until recently, there has still not been an unambiguously strong correspondence between the business leadership (eg. as embodied by the Chinese Chambers of Commerce) and the political leadership (eg. as embodied by the Malaysian Chinese Association) of the Chinese capitalist community. This is not to deny any similarity of interests. Rather, this distinction — eroding as it is — reminds us not only of the different cultural milieu of the two groups (eg. in terms of language medium to schooling), but more importantly, of the different economic interests involved.

But this is not all. As if by way of an addendum, Lee also treats us to an all too brief discussion of the emergence — in the wake of the 1929 economic crash — of Sino-Singaporean business interests less dependent on international trade and investment and with a greater stake in the growth of the domestic and regional economy. Chinese capitalists turned to more nationally based investments (such as light industry) in response to the depressed prices for export commodities and to colonial policies favouring British interests over local (mainly Chinese) businesses and the (predominantly Malay) peasantry.[4] While this aborted trend was not sufficient to create a fully fledged inde-

pendent local bourgeoisie, it allowed sufficient economic autonomy to encourage political as well as other activities by Chinese businessmen at variance with British preferences. This small but nonetheless significant development further reduced the complementarity between British interests and Chinese business considered as a whole. The English educated Chinese elite, especially the professionals, proved themselves to be the most acceptable of the Chinese from the colonial perspective.

While there may be much else to query about the overall structure or specific aspects of Lee Poh Ping's thesis it seems best for this reviewer — who is only superficially acquainted with Sino-Malayan social history in the period under consideration — to confine the remaining discussion here to those issues which impair the overall cogency and internal coherence of his argument. Despite the general subtlety of his treatment, the author occasionally resorts to over-simplifications. For instance, while insisting that secret societies transcended dialect group distinctions, Lee does not explain why secret society-led riots often involved opposing dialect groups. Similarly, he suggests that the colonial authorities decided in the late 1870s to use the secret societies instead of the Kapitan China system to regulate the Chinese community. Yet, we know that where the latter system was in force, as in Selangor for example, the Kapitan China was more often than not also the leader of the most powerful secret society. Of course, variations are possible but unfortunately this is not clarified in the book.

Another important ambiguity is to be found in Lee's book. There are several references to a strain inherent to Singapore's free trade society before British political intervention in the Malayan peninsula from 1874. However, one comes away from the book left in the dark about what causes this strain and what its social manifestations were. In his discussion, this strain is distinguishable from the other, more clearly elaborated tension arising from the expansion of free trade activity and its consequent clash with the gambier and pepper economy. Lee may well be referring to the need for the sphere of free trade activity to expand because of capital accumulation, but if this is the case, it is not clear from the book.

It is also unfortunate that Lee forgets to discuss the implications of the fate of gambier and pepper exports after the 1820s. These goods were increasingly integrated into the growing East-West commerce. Hence, it is unclear how the export of these commodities alone posed a threat to the British free traders. This suggests that the real basis for the contention, so eloquently discussed by Lee, was at the level of production, and not at the level of circulation of the commodities concerned. Contention for control of

4) For rubber, see P. T. Bauer, *The Rubber Industry: A Study in Monopoly and Competition* (London, 1948). For the tin industry, see Yip Yat Hoong, *The Development of the Tin Mining Industry of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur, 1969).

the factors of production, such as land and labor, is hence clearly at the center of the tensions.

All this having been said, the significance of Lee Poh Ping's contribution to the analytical reconstruction of Singaporean, and hence Malayan history cannot be diminished. By attempting to employ a sensitive class analysis, he has undermined several prevailing myths about his subject matter while implicitly validating the perspective that social history is essentially the unfolding of class contention. He has also explored some interesting aspects of the much touted distinction between comprador and national capitalist interests. His evidence underscores the view that few businessmen may be unambiguously identified exclusively with either category; the great majority are to be located in various complex intermediate positions, thus contributing to the amorphousness of this class. As he suggests, the nature of Chinese business in contemporary Singapore and Malaysia may be traced to the free trade period and the subsequent restructuring of the Malayan hinterland by colonial expansion.

Yet, despite the class analysis that it employs, Lee Poh Ping's study of Singapore Chinese society is essentially elitist in perspective in so far as it does not break fundamentally with focussing on the capitalist class, albeit in a sensitive and complex manner. Little serious attention is actually paid to the other Sino-Singaporean classes, except wherever and whenever they walk right on to center stage and hence cannot be omitted from consideration. Given the nature of historical sources available, this is understandable; it poses a very difficult problem to surmount, especially in the prevailing historiographical climate. Yet, in the long run, the necessary next step in the process of scientifically reconstructing our national heritage cannot be avoided.